

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

Guestworker minimum wage needlessly costs farmers

A small facet of a once little-known federal program now poses a big threat to many farmers and orchardists across the nation.

The H-2A visa program has for years been used by farms and orchards to obtain adequate numbers of farmworkers for harvest, pruning trees and other chores. The visa allows farmers to hire temporary foreign guestworkers.

To do that, farmers have to scale a mountain of paperwork, advertise the job openings, pay for transportation to and from the workers' home country and provide housing for them while they are on the job.

The use of H-2A workers has grown exponentially as the supply of domestic workers has dropped, mainly because they are finding jobs in other industries. The number of H-2A guestworkers has grown from 5,318 in 1990 to 242,762 in 2018.

The reason: Farmers cannot find enough domestic workers. They advertise the jobs, but the number of U.S. citizens who are willing and able to work is inadequate. As the Northwest tree fruit industry continues to grow the labor shortage has become even more critical.

Foreign guestworkers appreciate the



H-2A guestworkers from Mexico pick late blossoms off apple trees in Washington state. A federal government-imposed minimum wage threatens the viability of some farmers who hire foreign guestworkers.

EO Media Group file photo

opportunity to work in the U.S. They make many times more than they would make in their home country. For example, a field worker in Mexico makes about \$10.50 a day. The same worker made at least \$14.12 an hour in Washington state last year.

By and large, the H-2A program has allowed many farmers to continue when the lack of domestic workers would have otherwise crippled them.

A single aspect of the H-2A program, however, threatens to destroy it and the farmers who use it.

The adverse effect wage rate — known as AEWR — is the minimum wage the federal Department of Labor sets for H-2A workers in each state. Farmers must pay all of their workers the artificially high AEWR wage.

The problem is H-2A workers don't

adversely affect domestic farmworkers, who are in short supply anyway. But it does hurt farmers, who are stuck paying their employees more than the market would otherwise dictate.

Just this year, the Department of Labor increased the H-2A minimum wage 22.8% in Nevada, Utah and Colorado; 15.9% in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming; and 14.7% in Arizona and New Mexico.

The AEWR is set to increase 6.4%, to \$15.03 an hour in Oregon and Washington — far above the state minimum wages of \$11.25 and \$12, respectively.

Compared to the rate of inflation, 2.8%, the AEWR is indefensible and unaffordable, agricultural groups argue.

They are correct. An artificially high wage only puts farmers at risk.

A federal judge recently cited a technicality to rule against farmers who had challenged the AEWR and how it's set. He found that the lawsuit was beyond the statute of limitations for challenging the rule.

The Department of Labor would do well to rewrite that rule so the AEWR matches a state's minimum wage.

That's the only fair way to set a minimum wage in each state.

YOUR VIEWS

Pendleton grateful for flood responders

On Thursday, water from McKay Reservoir was discharged at a rate that was barely contained by McKay Creek inside the Pendleton city limits. When the Bureau of Reclamation announced it was going to have increase the outflow from the reservoir because of safety concerns, the county and city began to staff the Emergency Operations Center to prepare for flooding. On Friday, the outflow from McKay Reservoir was indeed increased and flooding occurred in southwest Pendleton along McKay Creek. The response from the county and city was immediate.

Assistance was requested from additional agencies. Public works personnel from both the city and county were mobilized and they began distributing sand bags and gravel to fill them. Police and the sheriff's department patrolled the areas that were flooding and warned residents about the danger. Plans were put in place to house anyone who needed to evacuate. Heavy equipment was staged. The National Weather service provided a representative to the EOC and by Sunday the Green Team from the State Fire Marshal's Association arrived to begin taking over as incident commanders. Team Rubicon, a national group of trained and experienced volunteers arrived to help with damage assessment. Steps are being taken to ask the governor to declare an emergency and also request federal help from FEMA, including funding.

Of particular note are the actions of hundreds of volunteers. Most of them came from Pendleton, but I have heard of volunteers from all over the county. At one time, about 300 of them were filling sand bags. Sports teams arrived and Pendleton businesses sent their staff members out to the flood zone to help. Food and beverages were donated by local establishments.

As mayor of Pendleton, and on behalf of myself and county commissioner George Murdock, I want to express my admiration for the professionalism, initiative, and energy displayed by city and county employees, many who got by on three hours of

sleep each day of the emergency. We should also be grateful for the expert response from state and federal agencies. The tremendous volunteer response reminds me that we enjoy a superior quality of life in Pendleton because so many of our citizens are willing to give up their time to help others in need.

A public meeting to discuss the emergency will be held on Wednesday night at Sherwood Heights Elementary School at 6 p.m. in the gymnasium. Information will be provided about the water levels projected to flow in McKay Creek, the remaining response efforts, and the coming recovery phase. A question and answer period will take place.

John Turner
Mayor of Pendleton

Outlawing guns won't stop suicides

I am a senior at Weston-McEwen High School. I read your article "How to Fight Suicide," written by David Brooks. I appreciate your willingness to educate others about how to help those who are thinking about committing suicide. It never crossed my mind that there are certain phrases that wouldn't be good to tell someone going through this. I myself have learned how to better help those who are fighting this darkness.

However, I do not agree that guns are part of the problem. According to The Medical Science Monitor: International Medical Journal of Experimental and Research, guns don't even make the top four of prevalent ways people commit suicide. If we were to outlaw guns, it wouldn't stop suicide. It is ignorant comments like this that misdirect the attention away from mental health.

People who are at their lowest are still people and if they are determined to kill themselves, they will find a tool to do the job. The fact that there is a gun available is not the issue; the fact that they are alone is. If we are to truly effect change, we need to stop making people afraid to seek help by making them feel that they will lose constitutional rights as if somehow they are less.

Alexis Verkist
Weston

OTHER VIEWS

From the ashes of Notre Dame

A first draft of this column was written before flames engulfed the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, before its spire fell in one of the most dreadful live images since Sept. 11, 2001, before a blazing fire went further than any of France's anticlerical revolutionaries ever dared.

My original subject was the latest controversy in Catholicism's now-years-long Lent, in which conflicts over theology and sex abuse have merged into one festering, suppurating mess. The instigator of controversy, this time, was the former pope, Benedict XVI, 92, who late last week surprised the Catholic intelligentsia with a 6,000-word reflection on the sex abuse crisis.



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Portions of the document were edifying, but there was little edifying in its reception. It was passed first to conservative Catholic outlets, whose palpable Benedict nostalgia was soon matched by fierce criticism from Francis partisans, plus sneers from the secular press at the retired pope's insistence that the sex abuse epidemic was linked to the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the 1970s.

The column I was writing before the fire was mostly a lament for what the document's reception betokened: A general inability, Catholic and secular, to recognize that both the "conservative" and "liberal" accounts of the sex abuse crisis are partially correct, that the spirits of liberation and clericalism each contributed their part, that the abuse problem dramatically worsened during the sexual revolution



even as it also had roots in patterns of clerical chauvinism, hierarchical arrogance, institutional self-protection.

So the column was a defense of Benedict's argument, in part, against secular sneers and liberal-Catholic sniping. But then it also agreed with certain criticisms of his letter, and worried about the ways that such an intervention contributes to the sense of a church in pieces, a church almost with two popes, each offering partial diagnoses to their respective factions.

That's where I was before the fire began in Paris. But now let me try to say something larger, something commensurate to the symbolism of one of Catholicism's greatest monuments burning on Holy Week, on the day after Catholics listened to a gospel in which the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom.

That larger thing is this: It is simply the problem of Roman Catholicism in this age — an age in which the church mirrors the polarization of Western culture, rather than offering an integrated alternative. The church has always depended on synthesis and integration. That has been part of its genius, a reason for all its unexpected resurrections and regenerations. Faith and rea-

son, Athens and Jerusalem, the aesthetic and the ascetic, the mystical and the philosophical — even the crucifix itself, two infinite lines converging and combining.

Notre-Dame de Paris is a monument to a triumphant moment of Catholic synthesis — the culture of the high Middle Ages, a renaissance before the Renaissance, at once Roman and Germanic but both transformed by Christianity, a new hybrid civilization embodied in the cathedral.

The Catholicism of today builds nothing so gorgeous as Notre-Dame in part because it has no 21st-century version of that grand synthesis to offer.

The cathedral will be rebuilt; the cross and altar and much of the interior survived. But the real challenge for Catholics, in this age of general post-Christian cultural exhaustion, is to look at what our ancestors did and imagine what it would mean to do that again, to build anew, to leave something behind that could stand a thousand years and still have men and women singing "Salve Regina" outside its cruciform walls, as Parisians did Monday night while Notre-Dame burned.

Ross Douthat is a columnist for the New York Times.